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A Biographical Tribute to the Memory of Trim

Matthew Flinders

I can never speak of cats without a sentiment of regret for my poor Trim, the favourite of all our ships company on the *Spyall*. This good natured purring animal was born on board His Majesty's ship the *Roundabout* in 1799 during a passage from the Cape of Good Hope to Botany Bay; and saving the rights and titles of the Parish of Stepney, was consequently an Indian by birth. The signs of superior intelligence which marked his infancy procured for him an education beyond what is usually bestowed upon the individuals of his tribe; and being brought up amongst sailors, his manner acquired a peculiarity of cast which rendered them as different from those of other cats as the actions of a fearless seaman are from those of a lounging, shame-faced ploughboy. It was, however, from his gentleness and the innate goodness of his heart that I gave him the name of my uncle Toby's honest, kind-hearted, humble companion.

In playing with his little brothers and sisters upon deck by moonlight, when the ship was lying tranquilly in harbour, the energy and elasticity of his movements sometimes carried him so far beyond his mark that he fell overboard; but this was far from being a misfortune; he learned to swim and to have no dread of water; and when a rope was thrown over to him, he took hold of it like a man, and ran up it like a cat. In a short time he was able to mount up the gangway steps quicker than his master, or even than the first lieutenant.

Being a favourite with everybody on board, both officers and seamen, he was well fed, and grew fast both in size and comeliness. A description of his person will not be misplaced here. From the care that was taken of him, and the force of his own constitution, Trim grew to be one of the finest animals I ever saw. His size emulated that of his friends of Angora: his weight being from ten to twelve pounds, according as our fresh-meatometer stood high or low. His tail was long, large, and bushy; and when he was animated by the presence of a stranger of the anti-catean race,

it bristled out to a fearful size, whilst vivid flashes darted from his fiery eyes, though at other times he was candour and good nature itself. His head was small and round - his physiognomy bespoke intelligence and confidence - his whiskers were long and graceful, and his ears were cropped in a beautiful curve. Trim's robe was a clear jet black, with the exception of his four feet, which seemed to have been dipped in snow, and his underlip, which rivalled them in whiteness. He had also a white star on his breast, and it seemed as if nature had designed him for the prince and model of his race: I doubt whether Whittington's cat, of which so much has been said and written, was to be compared to him.

Notwithstanding my great partiality to my friend Trim, strict justice obliges me to cite in this place a trait in his character which by many will be thought a blemish: he was, I am sorry to say it, excessively vain of his person, particularly of his snow-white feet. He would frequently place himself on the quarterdeck before the officers, in the middle of their walk; and spreading out his two white hands in the posture of the lion couchant, oblige them to stop and admire him. They would indeed say low to each other, 'See the vanity of that cat!' but they could not help admiring his graceful form and beautiful white feet. Indeed, when it is known that to the finest form ever beheld he joined extraordinary personal and mental qualifications, the impossibility that the officers could be angry with him must be evident; and they were men of too much elevation of mind to be jealous of him. I would not be an advocate in the cause of vanity; but if it is ever excusable, it was so in this case. How many men are there, who have no claim either from birth, fortune, or acquirements, personal or mental, whose vanity is not to be confined within such harmless bounds, as was that of Trim! And I will say for him that he never spoke ill of or objected to the pretensions of others, which is more than can be said for very many bipeds.

Trim, though vain as we have seen, was not like those young men who, being assured of an independence, spend their youth in idle trifling, and consider all serious application as pedantic and derogatory, or at least to be useless; he was, on the contrary, animated with a noble zeal for the improvement of his faculties. His exercises commenced with acquiring the art of leaping over the hands; and as every man in the ship took pleasure in instructing him, he at length arrived to such a pitch of perfection that I am persuaded, had nature placed him in the empire of Lilliput, his merit would have promoted him to the first offices in the state.

He was taught to lie flat upon on his back, with his four feet stretched out

like one dead; and in this posture he would remain until a signal was given him to rise, whilst his preceptor resumed his walk backwards and forwards; if, however, he was kept in this position, which it must be confessed was not very agreeable to a quadruped, a slight motion of the end of his tail denoted the commencement of impatience, and his friends never pushed their lesson further.

Trim took a fancy to learning the art of nautical astronomy. When an officer took lunar or other observations, he would place himself by the timekeeper and consider the motion of the hands, and apparently the uses of the instrument, with much earnest attention. He would try to touch the second hand, listen to the ticking, and walk all round the piece to assure himself whether or no it might be a living animal; and mewing to the young gentleman whose business it was to mark down the time, seemed to ask an explanation. When the officer had made his observation, the cry of 'Stop!' roused Trim from his meditations; he cocked his tail and, running up the rigging near to the officer, mewed at him to know the meaning of all those proceedings.

Finding at length that nature had not designed him for an astronomer, Trim had too much good sense to continue a useless pursuit; but a musket ball slung with a piece of twine, and made to whirl round upon the deck by a slight motion of the finger, never failed to attract his notice and to give him pleasure; perhaps from bearing a near resemblance to the movement of his favourite planet the moon, in her orbit round the primary which we inhabit. He was equally fond of making experiments upon projectile forces and the power of gravity. If a ball was thrown gently along the deck, he would pursue it; and when the gravitating principle combined with the friction overcame the impelling power, he would give the ball a fresh impetus, but generally to turn its direction into an elliptic curve (at other times the form of the earth appeared to be the object of his experiments, and his hall was made to describe an oblate spheroid). The seamen took advantage of this his propensity to making experiments with globular bodies; and two of them would often place themselves, one at each end of the forecabin, and trundling a ball backwards and forwards from one to the other, would keep Trim in constant action running after it; his admiration of the planetary system having induced an habitual passion for everything round that was in motion. Could Trim have had the benefit of an Orrery, or of being present at Mr Walker's experiments in natural philosophy, there can be no doubt as to the progress he would have made in the sublimest of sciences.

His desire to gain a competent knowledge in practical seamanship was not

less than he showed for experimental philosophy. The replacing of a topmast carried away, or taking a reef in the sails, were what most attracted his attention at sea; and at all times, when there was more hustle upon deck than usual, he never failed to be present and in the midst of it; for as I have before hinted, he was endowed with an unusual degree of confidence and courage, and having never received anything but good from men, he believed all to be his friends, and he was the friend of all. When the nature of the bustle upon deck was not understood by him, he would mew and rub his back up against the legs of one and the other, frequently at the risk of being trampled underfoot, until he obtained the attention of someone to satisfy him. He knew what good discipline required, and on taking in a reef, never presumed to go aloft until the order was issued; but so soon as the officer had given the words 'Away up aloft!', up he jumped along with the seamen; and so active and zealous was he that none could reach the top before or so soon as he did. His zeal, however, never carried him beyond a sense of dignity: he did not lay out on the yard like a common seaman, but always remained seated upon the cap, to inspect like an officer. This assumption of authority to which, it must he confessed, his rank, though great as a quadruped, did not entitle him amongst men, created no jealousy; for he always found some good friend ready to caress him after the business was done, and to take him down in his arms.

In harbour, the measuring of log and lead lines upon deck, and the stowage of the holds below, were the favourite subjects of his attention. No sooner was a cask moved than he darted in under it upon the enemies of his king and country, at the imminent risk of having his head crushed to, atoms, which he several times very narrowly escaped. In the bread room he was still more indefatigable; he frequently solicited to be left there alone and in the dark, for two or three days together, that nothing might interrupt him in the discharge of his duty. This was one of the brightest traits in my friend Trim's character, and would indeed do honour to any character. In making the following deductions from it I shall not, I think, be accused of an unjust partiality. First, it must be evident that he had no fear of evil spirits, and consequently that he had a conscience above reproach. Second, it is clear that he possessed a degree of patience and perseverance of which few men can boast; and third, that like a faithful subject he employed all these estimable qualities in the service of His Majesty's faithful servants, and indirectly of His Majesty himself. Alas! my poor Trim, thy extraordinary merit required only to be known, in order to excite universal admiration.

Trim was admitted upon the table of almost every officer and man in the ship: in the gunroom he was always the first ready for dinner, but though

he was commonly seated a quarter of an hour before any other person, his modest reserve was such that his voice was not heard until everybody else was served. He then put in his request, not for a full allowance - he was too modest - nor did he desire there should be laid for him a plate, knife, fork or spoon, with all which he could very well dispense, but by a gentle caressing mew he petitioned for a little, little bit, a kind of tythe from the plate of each; and it was to no purpose to refuse it, for Trim was enterprising in time of need, as lie was gentle and well bred in ordinary times. Without the greatest attention to each morsel, in the person whom he had petitioned in vain, he would whip it off the fork with his paw, on its passage to the mouth, with such dexterity and an air so graceful that it rather excited admiration than anger. He did not, however, leap oft the table with his prize, as if he had done wrong; but putting the morsel into his mouth and eating it quietly, would go to the next person and repeat his little mew if refused his wonted tythe, he stood ready to take all advantages. There are some men so inconsiderate as to be talking when they should be eating, who keep their meat suspended in mid-air till a semi-colon in the discourse gives an opportunity of taking their mouthful without interrupting their story. Guests of this description were a dead mark for trim: when a short pause left them time to take the prepared mouthful, they were often surprised to find their meat gone, they could not tell how.

Trim had one day missed a fine morsel from the hungry activity of one of the young gentlemen who dined in the gunroom. Seeing him, however, talking and eating at the same time, my persevering gentleman did not give it up, though the piece was half masticated and only waited for a period to disappear; but running up the waistcoat of our unsuspecting guest, for Trim was then but a kitten, and placing one paw at each corner of his mouth, he laid vigorous siege to his morsel; and whilst the astonished midshipman inarticulately exclaimed, 'G_d d_n the cat!' Trim fairly took the piece out of his mouth and carried it off. This was pushing his enterprises too far, and he therefore received a reprimand which prevented them in future.

The gunroom steward was, however, more particularly Trim's confidant; and though he had dined with the masters, he was not too proud to sit down a second time with the servant. William had such an opinion of Trim's intelligence that he talked to him as to his child, whilst my four-footed master, looking up in his face, seemed to understand him and to give rational answers. They had the following conversation after dinner on the day of Trim's audacious enterprise just related:

'Do you know, master Trim, that you have behaved very ill?' - Me-ew?

'It is very well to play your tricks with them that know you, but you should be more modest with strangers.' - Mew!

'How dare you say that I gave you no breakfast? did I not give you all the milk that was left, and some bread soaked in it?' - Moou-wow!

'No meat! What! you grow insolent? I'll chain you up; do you hear sir!' - Me-ew.

'Well, if you'll promise to behave better, you shall have a nice piece off the cold shank of mutton for your supper, you shall.' - Mew-wew!

'Gently, master Trim. I'll give it you now, but first promise me upon your honour.' - We-wee.

'Come then, my good boy, come up and kiss me.'

Trim leaped up on his shoulder and, rubbing his face against William's cheek, received the mutton piece by piece out of his mouth.

In an expedition made to examine the northern parts of the coast of New South Wales, Trim presented a request to be of the party, promising to take upon himself the defence of our bread bags, and his services were accepted. Bongaree, an intelligent native of Port Jackson, was also on board our little sloop; and with him Trim formed an intimate acquaintance. If he had occasion to drink, he mewed to Bongaree and leaped up to the water cask; if to eat, he called him down below and went straight to his kid, where there was generally a remnant of black swan. In short, Bongaree was his great resource, and his kindness was repaid with caresses. In times of danger, Trim never showed any signs of fear; and it may truly be said that he never distrusted or was afraid of any man.

In 1800, the *Roundabout* returned to England by way of Cape Horn and St. Helena; and thus Trim, besides his other voyages, completed the tour of the globe. Many and curious are the observations which he made in various branches of science, particularly in the natural history of small quadrupeds, birds and flying fish, for which he had much taste. These, with his remarks upon man and manners, if future leisure should enable me to put into order, I may perhaps give to the world; and from the various seas and countries he has visited, joined to big superior powers for distinguishing obscure

subjects, and talents for seizing them, these observations may be expected to be more interesting than the imaginary adventures of your guineas, shillings or half-pence, and to possess more originality than the Turkish spy.

Trim was not only a stranger to England, but also to a house and to the manner of living in it: the king of Bantam's ambassador was not more inexperienced in these matters than he. I took a lodging for him at Deptford, placing him under the guardianship of the good woman of the house, who promised to instruct him in the usages of terra firma; but she knew not what she had undertaken. He would go out at the sash window to the top of the house, for the convenience of making his observations on the surrounding country more at ease. If it came on to rain, the sash was put down. This would have been an invincible obstacle to other cats, but not so to Trim: he bolted through the glass like a clap of thunder, to the great alarm of the good hostess below. 'Good Gad, Trim,' exclaimed she on entering the chamber, 'is it thee? They said thou wast a strange outlandish cat, and verily I think thou art the devil: I must shut thee up, for if thou go'st to treat neighbours thus, I shall have thee taken up for a burglary; but come, I know thy master will pay the damage: has thou cut thyself?'

Woe to the good woman's china if Trim got into her closet. Your delicate town-bred cats go mincing in amongst cups and saucers without touching them; but Trim! If he spied a mouse there he dashed at it like a man of war, through thick and thin: the splinters flew in all directions. The poor woman at first thought an evil spirit was playing pranks in her cupboard - she opens the door with fear and trembling when, to her infinite dismay, out jumps my black gentleman upon her shoulder: she was well nigh dead with fear. Seeing how much mischief was done to her dear china, the pride of her heart, she seized Trim to beat him soundly; but instead of trying to escape, the droll animal rubs his whiskers up against her chin and falls to purring. She had no longer the heart to strike him; but after a moment's hesitation, she heaved a sigh and picked up the pieces.

I took him up to London in the stage coach, and as there were no fine ladies to be frightened at the presence of a strange cat, he was left at full liberty. He was not in the least disconcerted by the novelty of his situation; but placing himself upon the seat, and stretching out his white paws, conducted himself reasonably like any other passenger; to the admiration of two gentlemen who did not cease to make inquiries concerning his education, manners, and adventures, during the whole way to town.

A worthy acquaintance in London took Trim into his family; but he soon requested me to take him back, for 'such a strange animal,' said he, 'I never saw. I am afraid of losing him. He goes out into the streets in the middle of the day, and rubs himself against the legs of people passing by. Several have taken him up to caress him, but I fear someone will be carrying him off.'

I took him on board the *Spyall* to make a second voyage to the South Seas. Trim now found himself at home; and his gentleness and extraordinary confidence, joined to the amusement his droll antics furnished them, soon made him as great a favourite with his new shipmates as he had been on board the *Roundabout*.

We had several dogs on board the *Spyall*, but Trim was undisputed master of them all. When they were at play upon the deck, he would go in amongst them with his stately air; and giving a blow at the eyes of one, and a scratch on the nose to another, oblige them to stand out of his way. He was capable of being animated against a dog, as dogs usually may be against a cat; and I have more than once sent him from the quarterdeck to drive a dog off the forecastle. He would run half the way briskly, crouching like a lion which has prey in view; but then, assuming a majestic deportment, and without being deterred by the menacing attitude of his opponent, he would march straight up to him and give him a blow on the nose, accompanied with a threatening mew! If the dog did not immediately retreat, Trim flew at him with his war cry of Yow! If resistance was still made, he leaped up on the rail over his head and so bespattered him about the eyes that he was glad to run off howling. Trim pursued him till he took refuge below; and then returned smiling to his master to receive his caresses.

During our circumnavigation of Australia in the years 1801, 1802 and 1803, Trim had frequent opportunities of repeating his observations and experiments in his favourite science, natural history, and of exerting his undiminished activity and zeal for the public good. In the Gulf of Carpentaria, from the unhealthiness of the climate, the want of his usual fresh food, and perhaps from too much application to study, this worthy Creature became almost grey, lost much of weight, and seemed to be threatened with a premature old age; but to the great joy of his friends, he re-assumed his fine black robe and his accustomed portliness, a short time after returning to harbour. Only once was Trim known to be guilty of theft: he had a soul above it; but one unlucky afternoon a cold leg of mutton in the pantry tempted him. Being unable to carry it off himself, he got the

assistance of Van, a Dutch cat on board; and they had so far succeeded as to get it down off the shelf, and were dragging it together into the hold, when lot the steward came and surprised them in the fact. Van made his escape, but Trim, ever confident, made no efforts, and was seized and beaten soundly. He took the blows with philosophical patience; but no sooner was he set at liberty than he ran after his false Dutch friend, and repaid him with interest the beating he had received. The recital of this unfortunate anecdote of my friend Trim will, I hope, be received as a proof of the impartiality of the history; and I advertise the reader not to seek in it for any political allegory, but to be assured that the facts were really such as they are here related.

The *Spyall* being found to be rotten, Trim embarked on board His Majesty's ship the *Janty* to return to England, and was shipwrecked with us upon a coral bank in the Great Equinoxial Ocean on the night of August 17, 1803. The imagination can scarcely attain to what Trim had to suffer during this dreadful night, but his courage was not beaten down. He got to Wreck Reef Bank with the crew, and passed there two long and dreary months, during which his zeal in the provision tent was not less than it had been in the bread room, and his manners preserved all their amiability. When vessels arrived to our assistance Trim preferred following his master on board the *Minikin* schooner to going with the rest of the ship's company to China in a large vessel, giving thereby a memorable example of faithful attachment.

The *Minikin*, being very leaky, was obliged to stop at the Isle of France; and there poor Trim, his master and few followers were all made prisoners, under the pretext that they had come to spy out the nakedness of the land, though it was clear as day that they knew nothing of the war that had taken place a few months before. Trim was confined in a room with his master and another officer; and as he possessed more philosophy than we did, he contributed by his gay humour to soften our straight captivity; but sometimes also he contrived to elude the vigilance of the sentinel at the door, and left us to make little temporary excursions in the neighbourhood. It is probable that he made some new secret acquaintances in these visits, for they became more frequent than was prudent; and for fear of accidents, we were obliged to shut him up after supper.

On our being removed to the Maison Despeaux amongst the prisoners of war, a French lady offered to be Trim's security, in order to have him for a companion to her little daughter; and the fear of some clandestine proceedings on the part of the soldiers of the guard induced me to comply,

on finding it would I give no umbrage to His Excellency the French governor and captain-general. A fortnight had scarcely passed when the public gazette of the island announced that Trim was nowhere to be found, and offered a reward of ten Spanish dollars to anyone who would conduct him back to his afflicted little mistress. My sorrow may be better conceived than described; I would with pleasure have given fifty dollars to have had my friend and companion restored to me. All research and offers of recompense were in vain, poor Trim was effectually lost; and it is but too probable that this excellent unsuspecting animal was stewed and eaten by some hungry black slave, in whose eves all his merits could not balance against the avidity excited by his sleek body and fine furred skin.

Thus perished my faithful intelligent Trim! The sporting, affectionate and useful companion of my voyages during four years. Never, my Trim, 'to take thee all in all, shall I see thy like again'; but never wilt thou cease to be regretted by all who had the pleasure of knowing thee. And for thy affectionate master and friend, he promises thee, if ever he shall have the happiness to enjoy repose in his native country, under a thatched cottage surrounded by half an acre of land, to erect in the most retired corner a monument to perpetuate thy memory and record thy uncommon merits.

A lovely illustrated edition of this text is available at the [State Library of N.S.W.](#), published in Australia for the Library by [Angus & Robertson](#) with the help of [Nauticalia](#) from whom the British printing may be purchased. The nicest aspect of Flinders' essay is that it describes so modestly his incredible career.